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SUBJECT: THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN KUWAIT: AN UPDATE

¶1. (U) Summary: Prepared by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and published in Al-Qabas Arabic daily newspaper on September 27, 2009, a recently completed report revealed that Kuwait's public school students ranked near the bottom on international standardized tests, despite the country's unusually high expenditures for education. Although criticized by Kuwait's media, the report highlighted deficiencies in its public education system, a view further supported by a cross-section of Kuwaiti educators. At a December 7 town hall meeting on education, Kuwait's four female parliamentarians faced a barrage of parents' and educators' complaints on a myriad of issues, ranging from the poor level of Arabic language and Islamic studies instruction to the politicization of education due to parliament's "meddling" in educational and gender segregation issues. The vast majority of Kuwait's elite has chosen largely to ignore the deficiencies of the public educational system by enrolling their children in private schools. Many of these students then go overseas, especially to the U.S., to pursue their higher education. End summary.

¶2. (U) The Blair report polled over 40 countries from around the globe, and cites the results of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). TIMSS measures the mathematics and science achievements of fourth and eighth grade students in the United States against data gathered from students of the same age in other countries. In 2007, the last year the test was administered, Kuwait ranked near the bottom among both fourth and eighth graders in mathematics. Among eighth graders, Kuwait ranked 44 out of 48 countries surveyed, immediately below Botswana. In the 2006 PIRLS, Kuwait's students ranked 42 out of 45 countries surveyed. According to 2008 figures from the Ministry of Education, recently documented in the press, 50,000 Kuwaiti citizen children between the ages of 10 and 14 (out of a total of 131,000 Kuwaiti children in that age group) have not completed elementary school.

¶3. (U) The Blair Report also highlights the paradoxical high percentage of GDP that the GOK spends on education -- a whopping 8.3 percent, compared to 1.3 percent in the neighboring United Arab Emirates. (Note: A large portion of the funds appear to be devoted toward infrastructure and grants to university students studying overseas, rather than to improve public education at home. End note.)

¶4. (U) During a December 7 town hall meeting on education, organized by the Kuwait Women's Cultural and Social Association, Kuwait's four female parliamentarians faced parents' and educators' stark criticism of the state of education in Kuwait. The educational system, they warned, was in a state of chaos and dysfunction and in dire need of a complete overhaul. Specific criticisms included the number of classroom contact hours (the lowest in the world, according to one parent), the lack of adequate attention to children with special needs, the use of outdated pedagogical methods, and the poor quality of Arabic language and Islamic studies instruction.

¶5. (U) Several participants of the meeting complained about the politicization of the curriculum as evidenced by constant "meddling" of culturally and religiously conservative parliamentarians into curriculum and gender segregation issues. These groups' ability to

control the public education system, they argued, can be seen in increased calls by conservative Islamists for the Ministry of Education to enforce gender segregation laws. For example, on December 13, Parliament's Legislative and Legal Affairs Committee approved the implementation of gender segregation in private schools. The legislation now passes to the Committee on Education, where it will be discussed in detail. Although it may eventually go before the entire Parliament for a vote, we believe it will likely be defeated. (Note: Both public and private universities as well as public schools are already segregated by law. End note). To give another striking example, an ultra-conservative Salafi Islamist MP recently threatened to call for a "grilling" (parliamentary questioning) of the Prime Minister following a decision by the GOK to include music as part of the compulsory school curriculum. According to the MP, the decision represented an attempt to "Westernize" Kuwaiti society. Although no grilling over this issue ultimately took place, Kuwait's conservative elements lashed out for weeks against the Minister of Education.

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A Shift Since Liberation  
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¶6. (U) Following Kuwait's 1991 liberation from Iraq and the subsequent mass exodus of qualified teachers and educators of Palestinian origin, the country experienced a sudden, large demand for qualified educators. The departure of thousands of Palestinian teachers (a consequence of Yasser Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein) is seen by many Kuwaitis as the beginning of the deterioration of Kuwait's public educational system. Kuwaitis themselves had little interest in entering a profession that failed to offer either prestige or financial incentives. Expediency

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triumphed over quality, and Kuwait recruited less experienced and often under qualified teachers from around the Arabic-speaking Middle East. As a result, 95 percent of the more well-to-do Kuwaiti families now send their children to private schools. These schools, at which English is the primary language of instruction, prepare the students for university education overseas, including in the U.S.

¶7. (U) From the standpoint of many Kuwaitis, the private education alternative has quelled the demand for stronger public education and a revision of the current curriculum. According to education professionals at the Education Ministry and professors at Kuwait University, the state of public education is in dire need of reassessment. They agreed that encouraging Kuwaiti citizens to work in the public school system would begin to improve the current system, which is at best weak. One educator opined, "The students go through the public school system without learning any real life skills or critical thinking, and end up relying heavily on family connections [in lieu of an education]."

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Post's Activities  
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¶8. (U) Post continues to collaborate closely with the Education Ministry in regards to English teaching and other professional programs on teaching methodologies and curriculum development. In late November, the Director of Special Programs and Program Development at Georgetown University's Center for Language Education and Development visited Kuwait as an English Language Specialist for a series of workshops for teachers and supervisors of teachers in the field of English language. In addition to Kuwait University, the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) offers associate degrees in teaching, although interestingly it is restricted to female students. Post works with PAAET on educational, English teaching programs and professional exchange programs such as the International Visitors and Leadership Program (ILVP) and U.S. Speaker Programs. On the curriculum front, the Embassy works closely with Kuwait University, as well as with the private Gulf University for Sciences and Technology and American University of Kuwait (AUK), and sponsors events that promote discussion and critical thinking.

9. (U) Despite the problems Kuwait faces in its public school system, the country continues to send a large number of its best students - mostly educated in the elite private schools - to U.S. universities. Currently, the number of Kuwaiti students in the U.S. totals over 3,000. Through December 15 of this year, 1,392 student F1 and J1 visas were issued, an increase of 45 percent over 2008 and the first time the numbers exceeded those of 1999, before the dampening effect of 9/11. Given the steady increase of GOK scholarships specifically designated for higher education in the United States, the numbers are expected to continue to increase in the years ahead.

10. (U) Comment: As is often the case, public spending per student in Kuwait is not a good indication of the overall quality of education provided. Kuwaiti elites tend to have fewer children and value education as a means for advancement, while poorer tribal families have fewer resources spread among a larger number of children and with less exposure generationally to education, often tend to perceive this as a matter for which the government bears total responsibility rather than a shared responsibility between government and parents. In Kuwait, it appears that the biggest challenge for the public education system is the quality of its teachers, rather than infrastructure, which can be quite advanced (particularly the case, for example, for disabled Kuwaitis who enjoy access to first-class facilities, including sports facilities where Kuwait was an early trail-blazer in the Gulf). Compounding the problem, foreign educators, who comprise a large percentage of the teaching staff, are not supported by school administrators in attempts to discipline - much less give a failing grade to -- a Kuwaiti child. There have been a number of high-profile cases of angry parents suing teachers - who are then barred from leaving the country until the end of the legal process -- for taking disciplinary action. (Note: This phenomenon also continues to some degree at University, where Embosfs have witnessed Members of Parliament call professors in efforts to raise a low mark of a constituent's child. End Note.) Until the Kuwaiti population-at-large places a greater value on public education and demands improvements, the chances for near-term improvement are unencouraging. It is ironic that Kuwait, in the 1970s, was in the forefront of providing scholarships for other Gulf Arabs, some now quite prominent in their governments, to study overseas.

JONES